

A MARKET RESEARCH PROJECT  
FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A REGIONAL RECYCLING STRATEGY

Community Economic Development -- Final Project Report

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### Definition of the Problem

The major problem that my project addresses is the solid waste crisis, the result of our country's production of more than 400,000 tons of trash a day.<sup>1</sup> Eighty to ninety per cent of this enormous garbage glut is presently being disposed of in our nation's landfills.<sup>2</sup> These landfills are rapidly reaching capacity. In New Hampshire, for example, sixty-six landfills and dumps statewide are currently in the process of closure.<sup>3</sup> A recent study by the federal Environmental Protection Agency concluded that one half of all the municipalities in the United States will run out of landfill space within the next ten years.<sup>4</sup> The remaining twenty per cent of our country's waste stream is either incinerated or recycled.

Government planners increasingly advocate waste-to-energy plants as the "solution" to the garbage crisis. Mass-burn incinerators, as they are called, are considered by many to be a threat to both human health and the environment at large.<sup>5</sup> In addition, they have not proven to be as affordable a method of garbage disposal as had been hoped, in the cases of most communities that use them to deal with their solid waste.<sup>6</sup>

The solution that many communities, both nationally and internationally, are beginning to embrace is to recycle or source-separate garbage into its different material components.<sup>7</sup> Recycling is the only way to assure ecologically sound and safe waste management technologies. In short, it is imperative that our society begin to recycle, reuse, and reduce its waste stream. The cultural and economic changes needed to bring about an enlightened awareness regarding the creation and disposal of solid waste will require co-ordinated

efforts on the parts of businesses, government, and consumers.

### Project Goals

The mission of my CED project can be generally described as an effort to lay the groundwork for local citizens and activists to measure and determine the feasibility of an environmentally and economically sound solid waste management plan. The desired outcome of this effort will be to convince citizens and elected officials in the project's target community of the feasibility of a viable recycling program for their town.

The specific goals and objectives of the project's market research survey are:

- A) To provide information to policy makers about the public's attitudes towards recycling, and its willingness to participate in a recycling program;
- B) To help determine what type of recycling program the public will be most receptive to;
- C) To explore whether user-fee systems are justifiable and acceptable as a policy for landfill use;
- D) To measure the extent of awareness local residents display regarding the present solid waste crisis; and
- E) To determine whether individual and family consumer attitudes will be affected by the rising cost of garbage disposal.

Another desired result of the development of this type of market research methodology is the education of waste-management policy authors. This is achieved by providing the information needed to develop viable recycling programs.

Sound and effective solid waste management policy can make or break a recycling program. The Valley News reported on December 22, 1988 that "the town of Hartford, Vermont has initiated a policy that gives landfill users a 50% decrease in their user fees at Hartford's landfill if they recycle their waste." According to the December 10, 1988 edition of the New York Times, "The states of Oregon and Washington have considered policy proposals to ban, label or tax disposable diapers." These diapers, the article notes, do not decompose, and they presently fill two per cent of our country's available landfill space, at a disposal cost of three hundred million dollars a year.

The policy initiatives mentioned above are but two examples of how governmental policies can facilitate the development of environmentally and economically sound waste management programs.

### Methods

The main strategy of my CED project involves the development of a methodology employing market research to collect data from the broadest possible cross-section of a community, data which can be used by policy-makers to develop an effective recycling program in their town or district. The market tool emphasized in this project is a survey approach.

The steps employed to achieve my research objectives are:

1. To design a questionnaire for the purpose of gathering relevant data;
2. Selecting a town in which to do a pilot study;
3. Obtaining the voter registration list from the chosen town, and randomly selecting an appropriate sized sample of respondents from the list;

4. Writing an appropriate cover letter to the sample respondents;
5. Compiling the questionnaires, editing and coding the responses, and entering them into an IBM 4381 computer for statistical analysis; and
6. Documenting the results of the study and presenting them to the appropriate policy-making body of the chosen town.

I have currently completed steps 1, 2 and 3 of my research objectives. One serious problem that I have encountered is the lack of funds available for a relatively new town committee. I am now in the process of seeking grants, donations and other sources of funding to enable me to proceed with steps 4, 5 and 6 and the completion of my CED project.

### Results

The current results of my project are that I am presently working with the recycling committee for the town of Thetford, Vermont. They have collectively identified their own research objectives for the survey. These are as follows:

- a) To find out who is currently recycling their household refuse in the town of Thetford;
- b) To discover who in town would support a recycling program and to what degree;
- c) To determine what material components residents are currently source separating, and what other materials they would recycle if the opportunity existed;
- d) To explore what kind of recycling program Thetford residents prefer, e.g.: a full-time facility, mobile recycling trailer, curbside pick-up, part-time facility, or a facility at their landfill;

- e) To find out whether Thetford residents would make two stops to dispose of their garbage; and
- f) To determine whether Thetford residents will support the allocation of local tax dollars for the establishment of a recycling program in town.

The recycling committee's main objective is to use the information gathered in the survey to document a mandate in their town for the funding and development of a recycling program. They hope to have the study results completed and documented by March, 1989. At that time, the results will be presented at Thetford's annual town meeting to facilitate the appropriation of funds for a town recycling program.

#### Analysis/Conclusions/Recommendations

The solid waste management problem that we are now facing in this country has thrust us into a crisis mode. As a result, important decisions are often being made in haste, and policies such as the signing of a twenty-year contract with a company that sells and manages incinerators, have been adapted much too quickly. My CED project was at times frustrating and difficult to get off the ground as a result of policy decisions made by the solid waste district that I live in. The reasons that it was not advantageous to implement my project in the New Hampshire/Vermont Solid Waste District are the following:

1. The district is committed to a twenty-year contract with an incinerator company. The contract contains a "put or pay" clause which stipulates that each town within the solid waste district must provide a minimal tonnage of municipal solid waste to the Claremont, NH incinerator. They have to pay for that amount at a cost of \$80./ton whether or not they are actually providing that minimal tonnage.

2. Public officials in my district are often hostile or uncooperative towards recycling initiatives as a result of their commitment to the technology of mass-burn incinerators, which they have been led to believe are their "quick fix" solution to the solid waste crisis.
3. The Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Services for the State of New Hampshire is a former employee of Allied Signal, a major industry developer. Commissioner Howard's self-described major career accomplishment was the development of mass-burn incinerator projects in New England. The Department of Environmental Services is the regulating agency for all solid waste projects in New Hampshire. It has acted as a green light for all the proposed and operating incinerators in the state.
4. New Hampshire is the only state without a bottle bill.

Another difficulty that I encountered in my effort to get my project off the ground was the fact that the recycling programs that do exist are often undercapitalized, lacking adequate resources and/or funding. I am presently a member of the recycling committees for the towns of Cornish and Claremont, New Hampshire. Both groups are struggling to provide an adequate and effective recycling program in their communities. The Cornish Recycling Center has operated for the past fifteen years without any funding whatsoever from the town. The Claremont recycling committee is working without funds to do public outreach and education. Their program is also in need of new equipment and buildings.

In conclusion, I would like to state that correct planning is an essential element in the search for a solution to our country's solid waste management crisis. Incorrect and inappro-

priate solid waste management plans can cripple a region, both environmentally and economically, for a long time. This conclusion suggests that employing market research in the development of solid waste management plans can be an effective and appropriate strategy. Communities using this strategy are capable of researching and measuring what potential exists for their proposed recycling program. In addition, this strategy is an answer for elected officials who mistakenly proclaim, "I know that the citizens of my town won't recycle."

I would like to contribute the following recommendations on the basis of my CED project experience. First, it would be helpful if the CED curriculum included a course that introduces CED students to research methodologies. Second, it would be helpful if a seed-money fund were established to help students' projects get off the ground in cases where funds are needed. And last, I hope that the importance of environmental concerns and the effect ~~that~~ they have on the well-being of our communities are stressed in the CED program.



Footnotes

1. Science for the People, Vol. 19, no. 6, Nov./Dec. 1987, page 6.
2. Ibid., page 6.
3. My CED Project Paper, Term One, page 1.
4. Op. cit., page 5.
5. My CED Project Paper, Term One, page 1; Term Three, page 2.
6. My CED Project Paper, Term One, page 2.
7. My CED Project Paper, Term One, pp. 3-5; Term Three, page 2.